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# EARTH, WIND AND FIRE

Earth, Wind and Fire, a dynamic Chicago-spawned group, has an original musical style that encompasses all the elements of the universe, and then some: African drumbeats are fused with funky Southside Chicago blues, then jumbled together with high-spirited Southern gospel; raucous rock and relevant "message" lyrics. The result? A nine-man explosion of sound that touches -- and moves -- listeners of every age and musical preference.

Earth, Wind and Fire's eclectic style is hardly flash-in-the-pan experimentation; the amazing musical career of group leader Maurice ("Reese") White tells the story. Born in Memphis in 1943 to a vocalist mother and doctor father, Maurice started out on the gospel circuit at the ripe old age of 6. He toured the South with such bigtimers as the Pilgrim Travellers, James Cleveland and the Clara Ward Singers. At age 12, he was already an old-timer on the gospel train and decided it was time to change bags: he took up drumming, moved with his family to Chicago, and -- throughout his high school years -- did gigs with some of the Windy City's biggest blues, rock and jazz bands. A well-weathered

musical veteran by the time he was 19, White thought he'd put music aside for a while to study medicine. He enrolled in Chicago's Roosevelt University for pre-med courses but, lo and behold, his first love sneaked back up on him and, in between courses in chemistry and zoology, he started drumming for the school band. In a matter of months, he drummed his way out of Roosevelt U. and into the Chicago Conservatory of Music, where he studied harmony, theory and other technical aspects of the art he'd been pursuing since childhood. In his third year at the Conservatory, he started doing studio work for some of Chicago's biggest recording acts: Etta James, Fontella Bass, Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions. Then, after three years of beating drums on hit records, he joined the Ramsey Lewis Group for a stint on the road.

Gospel ... jazz ... blues ... rock ... studio work ... formal study ... playing in clubs and on the road. The only thing left for White to master was song-writing and producing, so, after leaving the Ramsey Lewis Group, he got together with rock singer Wade Flemons and bass player Donald Whitehead -- Chicagoans both -- and did just that. "In the latter part of '69," White recalls, "we -- Wade Flemons and Don Whitehead and I -- decided to become a singing group as well. We put out a record, 'La La,' for Capitol, and we didn't expect any great results ... but it turned out to be a hit in the Midwestern area."

They soon added vocalist Sherry Scott; Michael Beale on harmonica and guitar; Phillard Williams on drums; Chester Washington on reeds; Alex Thomas on trombone; Leslie Drayton, trumpet; and Maurice's brother, Verdine White, on bass. The sound that emerged from this potent conglomerate made success more certain than a prophecy from the I Ching. The group travelled to Los

Angeles, the starting gun was fired, and, by July of '70, Earth, Wind and Fire was on its way ... not with a whisper but a bang: Jim Brown became their manager, Warner Bros. signed them for an album, and distinguished director Melvin Van Peebles commissioned them to do the soundtrack for his movie, Sweet Back.

E,W&F's debut, "Earth, Wind & Fire," fuses an upbeat, eclectic musical style with lyrics that carry a message profoundly relevant to our times. In White's words, "We're trying to turn people on to what's happening around us ... trying to awaken their minds ... trying to spread a little peace and love out there. We believe the world is in a turmoil because nobody knows who they are, and we hope that through our music we can help people find themselves and be themselves. By understanding who he is, a man has a head start on digging the truth, not only within himself but all around him."

"We function as a family," White says. And a very creative, frenetic family at that: "Our concept of music is totally new. It's wild ... free ... exciting. Everbody in the group plays two or three different instruments. We wear colorful clothes. We move around a lot on stage. Whenever we play, the audience picks up on us and gets up and claps and moves around with us."

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